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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHARRIS AND EHOPKINS)

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: 22ND JMC FOCUSES ON COUNTERTERRORISM NEEDS, AFRICOM

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[1](#)B. TUNIS 619

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) During the May 22-23 US-Tunisia Joint Military Commission meetings in Tunis, participants reiterated the importance of the two countries' strategic partnership and strong bilateral mil-to-mil relationship and sought ways to advance cooperation. The Tunisian co-chair, Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane, stressed Tunisia's need for US assistance to combat transnational terrorism, particularly following recent terrorist incidents in Tunisia and the formation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Morjane said the Tunisian military needs US support as it expands its counterterrorism capabilities and increases its border oversight. US co-chair Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Theresa Whelan sought Tunisia's views on AFRICOM and encouraged Tunisia to continue its moderate regional stance. In a private meeting, Morjane told DASD Whelan that the GOT is "nervous" about its perception that US-Tunisian military relations are in decline. He added that the Tunisian government cannot support US efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.
END SUMMARY.

MILITARY COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS

[1](#)2. (C) The 22nd US-Tunisia Joint Military Commission was held in Tunis on May 22-23 and co-chaired by Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Theresa Whelan. Morjane opened the meetings by noting that the JMC, following closely on the heels of the May 4-6 visit of the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, demonstrates the continued vitality of the US-Tunisian strategic partnership and joint commitment to peace, stability, democracy and the global struggle against terrorism. Morjane said that Tunisia has always stood with the United States in support of peace and freedom, while maintaining a policy of moderation in its international relations. Today, the world faces new challenges, as traditional threats are replaced by more dangerous threats, such as terrorism, smuggling and trafficking, that are more difficult to defeat. Morjane said that terrorism today threatens the stability of all the countries in North Africa. He added that Tunisia is prepared to make sacrifices to defeat terrorism, but that it expects the support of friends

and partners, foremost among them the United States. Morjane told DASD Whelan that if she left Tunisia with only one idea, he hoped that it would be that Tunisia is a strong friend committed to fighting all forms of terrorism.

13. (S) The subsequent threat briefing highlighted increasing terrorist activity in the region today. Senior Colonel Nouri Ben Taous noted that terrorism in North Africa is fueled by religious extremism, regional issues, poverty, exclusion and ignorance. Beginning in Algeria, terrorism became a regional phenomenon that now represents a threat to Tunisia's security and stability. This threat materialized in the December 2006 and January 2007 terrorist plot in Tunisia and an increased number of terrorist activities along Tunisia's western border with Algeria (Ref A). Ben Taous said that Tunisian territory could also be used by those seeking to move weapons, explosives and recruits from Algeria to Libya. The Tunisian military uses an integrated counterterrorism approach that involves all three branches of the Tunisian Armed Forces (TAF: Army, Navy, and Air Force). Ben Taous said that the Tunisia Armed Forces undertake considerable efforts given its available resources, but that the border security system consumes all available means. After fifteen years of TAF support for Tunisia's CT efforts, TAF equipment must be updated to face the new threat.

14. (S) DASD Whelan asked Minister Morjane what the military's modernization priorities were. Morjane said that almost 9,000 soldiers currently patrol Tunisia's borders at any one time, but that, first and foremost, Tunisia needs additional helicopters to patrol the southern borders. Morjane said Tunisia had already moved eight armed helicopters to the south, as this is the sole way to intervene and control some of the more remote locations. Secondly, Morjane said Tunisia needs a ground surveillance radar system that provides better coverage. Third, the military must improve financial compensation to motivate staff in remote border areas. Finally, Tunisian Army Special Forces units must be ready to intervene in CT activities and needs to update its equipment (NVGs) and training (particularly for urban combat). The military's CT efforts complement those of the Ministry of Interior, said Morjane, but nearly all aviation support is provided by the military.

AFRICOM

15. (C) DASD Whelan briefed JMC participants, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, on the thoughts behind and strategy for AFRICOM. Explaining that the Command will utilize an integrated approach that includes USAID and the State Department, Whelan said AFRICOM will be a 21st century organization that seeks to prevent problems from escalating into crises. Morjane and MFA Chief of Staff Hatem Atallah both thanked Whelan for the additional details about AFRICOM and were generally optimistic about the new Command. Neither offered an official GOT response or perspective on AFRICOM's formation, but both asked a number of additional questions. Of particular interest was where the Command would be headquartered in the continent, when AFRICOM would be stood up, what the Command's relationship with the African Union would be, and how coordination between North Africa and its Mediterranean neighbors would be effected under AFRICOM. Both Morjane and Atallah also sought to better understand how the various USG agencies involved in the command would coordinate its activities.

GOT CONCERNS ABOUT BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

16. (S) In a separate personal meeting with DASD Whelan and the Ambassador, Minister Morjane said the GOT was surprised by a number of recent developments and requests that seemed contrary to the excellent relations between the United States and Tunisia. Morjane specifically mentioned a recent Blue Lantern post shipment verification check, Leahy vetting

requirements for military training, the lengthy delays in the shipment of UH-1H helicopters, Link-11 and declines in FY-08 FMF. Morjane told Whelan that this "perception of difficulties" was creating "nervousness" in the GOT. Tunisia is "on takeoff," said Morjane, and needs fuel in the form of US assistance for its counterterrorism efforts. Whelan clarified that the United States did not intend to communicate a lack of trust to the GOT and that some of his concerns were simply administrative issues. She reiterated that the United States wants to maintain its strong partnership with Tunisia. Morjane said Tunisia will continue to look for ways to cooperate with the USG, but added that the GOT cannot support US efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, because "the regime cannot survive" such involvement. He asked for a "signal" from the United States that it remains committed to close relations with Tunisia.

COMMENT

¶7. (S) While formal JMC discussions focused on the strong historical military partnership between the United States and Tunisia, Morjane clearly conveyed that the GOT is concerned this relationship is in jeopardy. Tunisia faces a clear and growing terrorist threat and the military is committed to counterterrorism cooperation with the United States. We must look for ways to expand and improve our relationship with the Tunisian military in order to combat this growing threat in North Africa. END COMMENT.

¶8. (U) DASD Whelan has cleared this message.
GODEC